

This interview about hype will blow your mind: read it before your friends do

Maddyness spoke "face-to-face" with author, journalist, keynote speaker and one the World Economic Forum's Global Shapers, Gemma Milne, to discuss why robots won't steal our jobs, how hype can be used for good and how we can hype-proof ourselves.

When you think of hype, you may think of it as a marketing tool. If your finger's on the pulse fam, it could make you think of that episode of Hassan Minaj's Patriot Act in which he rails against 'hyped' fashion brand Supreme. Maybe you date it back to the minidisc player. Perhaps it was the millennium bug. Did hype exist before the internet?

Ask the ad industry and they'll yawn a yes at you. Until now, however, it feels there hasn't ever been such fertile ground for hype, a cousin of click-bait, to spread 'like wildfire' as Gemma Milne outlines in her captivating new book, *Smoke and Mirrors*. Hype gets us all to pay attention, quickly. Or, perhaps instead it can be said that it gets us to a position of assumed knowledge, unthinkingly.

What is hype?

First off, though, let's define hype. Milne, whose words have graced the pages of BBC, the *Guardian*, *The Times*, and Forbes, amongst many others, and who is also an advisor to the European Commission and Innovate UK, explains that giving hype a definition, as she sees it, was one of the hardest things to do when writing the book.

'There are many definitions of hype in the dictionary, whether it's 'exaggerated publicity', or 'used to get a message out there', and so on. When you ask people what they think the definition is, they tend to have an emotional reaction, thinking it's a bad thing, and close to misinformation.'

Commonly, it's internet slurry telling you that 'you *need* to buy this amazing product *now* (before it sells out!)', or otherwise akin to 'fake news' giving people an inherent level of belief in any worrying ideology. Milne takes a step back to give it a more levelled view.

'For me, personally, I see it as a tool to communicate the complex. Sometimes it can be used for great things, and sometimes problematic things – as with any tool – whether it's the internet or a hammer.'

No specialist skills required, apply within

Let's say you're schooled and savvy in tech and industry, and you see a headline declaring that 'robots are stealing our jobs.' As an expert, you will intuitively recognise that there's more to it. That there is, perhaps, a certain amount of automation that industry can benefit from. You may understand that it is, in fact, a deliberate decision from executives to sideline Andy for an articulated arm, or Gillian for a Gantry robot.

That the question is, then, are we okay with that? And how are these companies retraining the staff they're doing out of roles, or are the dividends only going to the shareholders? – The robots aren't Terminator-style overlords here to steal our jobs. This narrative, Milne argues, distracts us from asking the right questions of the decision-makers.

But to understand this all you'd have to be an expert on the subject, right? Especial insight into any one field gives you the easy authority to see beyond related headlines. As a general absorber of the news, though, there's a good chance that, in the over three hours you spend a day online, you're seeing lots of hype around subjects on which you're not an expert. Too bad, sucker. No dice.

Except Milne explains that you don't, in fact, need to become an expert in any one subject to spot the tool in use. There's an easy approach that can make you less susceptible to being led astray.

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Spotting hype

'The power of hype is in the illusion. It's not that it ceases to exist when we can spot it, it's that it ceases to have problematic power: we don't follow it blindly.

'To see through hype,' she explains in brief (the book provides several eye-opening tips to best ensure your wisdom), 'you pause, take a step back and consider the context of the information in front of you. Who said it? Why have they said it? — It doesn't need to be a conspiracy, you can do this in a measured way — Is it a message from an individual, from a company, from a politician? Why might this message be being used?

'Then, if you hear anyone saying something absolutist, you ask yourself 'what does that depend on?'

'Say you read that AI will cure cancer: what does that depend on?... 'Okay,' you might stop and think, 'so I guess it depends on funding, I would assume it would depend on regulation, probably depends on the individual, the country and their healthcare system.

'And then it's up to you whether you want to do your research' Or, at the very least, take the absolutism with a pinch of salt.

There is no blame in Milne's argument: 'personal responsibility is a difficult thing – my argument is that it's your responsibility as a citizen. I live on this planet and if I'm going to play an active role in culture, societies, science and tech, I need to feel empowered to engage more, as best as I can.'

You don't need to be an expert, but you do need to be smart?

MENSA has nothing to do with it, before you worry this task is best left to those with more grey matter: 'The difference between those that are great critical thinkers and those who aren't? It's not to do with intellect, or what degree you have: it's to do with the bravery you have to find the answer. And the enjoyment of it.'

The book gives readers 'the nudge' to realise that this kind of critical thinking is important, and demonstrates, through examples in science and tech, how to reprogramme our approach. It's not that Milne debunks the 'good' in agritech, say, it's that she makes the argument that it's not as clear cut as technology saving us on its own.

We all can use reminding

Even if this comes naturally to you, I venture that the book will challenge you in received beliefs – no matter your sense of your critical capabilities. In the book, Milne addresses headlines that we often contest when discussing with people outside of our echo chambers.

Farming, for example, may not be the big bad wolf it is often made out to be (a cursory search on Google for 'farming is bad' shows how divisive it can be). Perhaps instead the issue is a broken food system further entrenched by a growing population and our demand for low prices. I simplify but, as Milne explains insightfully in the book, it's not clear-cut.

Animal-free protein may well be an innovative solution to the world's growing meat consumption, but the book points out that, 'In 2019, there was a study that found that the CO2 emissions from electricity generation in labs creating cultured meat could be more detrimental for the environment, in terms of greenhouse gases, than meat farming.' She doesn't conclude righteousness for any one side of the argument, just stipulates that there is always more to it.

I admit that sometimes I absorb the 'facts' in mindless scrolling and media absorption, later sharing something more verbat-ish than verbatim (further muddying the waters of fact). '*Apparently,*' it starts, 'the end of the world is coming. I can't remember where I read it,' — I *watched* this claim made as part of a storyline on sitcom Parks and Recreation, but that doesn't matter — 'we're going to need to start building bunkers.' Glad to help advise folks that bunkers will protect them from the apocalypse.

I have room for improvement, it's clear. Diplomatically, Milne explains, 'Sometimes we're not very good at saying 'I read this headline, but I didn't read the whole article; do you know about it?'... You can still have a responsible discussion based on open questions. It's not about self-policing, it's about being more conscious about how we engage with facts.'

'My book is *not* here to tell us all to change our priorities and upend our thinking, it's more about us taking a pause. Some people have more influence and decision-making power than others, and you have to dial up or dial down your responsibility based on what you're doing, but public sentiment matters.'

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Bad hype

Hype at its most dangerous is still nuanced. To whom is it dangerous? The example I'm given is that of our love for electronics – the hype around wanting the latest phones, electric cars, laptops (anything with batteries). This heightened demand puts huge geopolitical pressure on the Democratic Republic of Congo, who mine the cobalt used in these products' batteries. Problematic, though not to the end-user – when you know the facts, it's up to you to decide what's right or wrong, and where your values sit.

Another: maybe there are 'overhyped' pharmaceuticals winning funding that could be allocated to more effective trials and treatments. Interrogating hype isn't only an exercise applied to reading Sunday's papers, it can drive our focus away from elephants in the room, and can influence decisions from how we conduct the everyday, to who to invest in, and who to vote for. I refuse to bring up Brexit in this article, but you get the gist.

Good hype

And where hype can really work well, Milne explains, is when a research paper which is incredibly complex needs explaining to funding bodies who may not have aligned expertise to fully comprehend the study. Or, a timely example of hype being overlooked when it could have come in useful: in spreading

information regarding COVID-19 – rather than having comprehensive and simple information being widely disseminated, it felt like we had none, or hard to compute information if at all.

‘I’m not out here to make people feel guilty or that they have a heightened responsibility, it’s that we should all agree we need a better understanding of hype, and to do this as a collective, because hype works in collectives.’

And the book, I hope will go far in doing just as Milne intends. Deserving and beneficial hype, this: *I couldn’t put it down*, deciding, too, that it should be taught in schools; a gift to those of voting age. ‘*Terse inter-generational political debates no more!*’ with this as a pre-read; people looking to equip themselves with a more measured approach to their thinking? This book will fascinate and inform. Not least for its tips, but it’s full to the rafters with interesting facts and insights that alone make it fast digestible. Helpful when the news keeps on getting stuck in your throat.

Smoke & Mirrors: How Hype Obscures the Future and How to See Past It (Robinson), by Gemma Milne is out now, available from [Waterstones](#) for £14.99, or on audiobook, read by the author, from [Audible](#), for £17.49.

You can also get an early peek at the introductory chapter of *Smoke & Mirrors* from the author’s website.

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